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SUBJECT: OMANI FOREIGN MINISTER VISITS DAMASCUS; PLANNING
TRIP TO TEHRAN

Classified By: Ambassador Gary A. Grappo for Reasons 1.4 (b, d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Oman's Minister Responsible for Foreign Affairs reported that Syrian officials were preoccupied with the large number of Iraqi refugees in Syria during his recent visit to Damascus. The Syrians, he contended, were hopeful for an amicable resolution to the political crisis in Beirut and were not opposed to a tribunal to prosecute the killers of former Lebanese PM Hariri if the court's mandate and scope were not overly broad. The Syrian government claimed to want to play a constructive role in Iraq and elsewhere in the region, but felt that the U.S. and other countries were ignoring its national interests. The Omani FM plans to travel to Tehran to continue urging Iran to "reform" its nuclear and other policies. Syrian President Assad will reportedly also visit Tehran soon to consult with Ayatollah Khamenei. End Summary.

SYRIA OVERWHELMED BY IRAQI REFUGEES

¶2. (C) Omani Minister Responsible for Foreign Affairs Yousef bin Alawi told the Ambassador during a wide-ranging February 11 meeting (septels) that Syrian government officials were "preoccupied" by several issues during his recent visit to Damascus. One of their main concerns, bin Alawi reported, was the severe strain that the huge number of Iraqi refugees was placing on the country's resources. According to bin Alawi's Syrian hosts, more than one million Iraqis were now present in Syria, many of them concentrated in the Damascus area. Along with over-burdening Syria's schools, hospitals, and other public services, officials in Damascus asserted that the Iraqis had introduced crimes previously unknown in Syria, such as kidnapping for ransom. The Syrians also claimed that their attempts to work with the Iraqi government to staunch the flow of refugees had been ignored, and that they were hesitant to close their borders with Iraq for fear of condemnation by the international community. "We have to help the Syrians on this problem," bin Alawi stated.

DAMASCUS CLAIMS TO WANT PEACEFUL SOLUTION IN BEIRUT

¶3. (C) Turning from the refugee issue, bin Alawi said that his Syrian interlocutors expressed a strong desire to contribute to stability in the region. While the Syrians have their "own views" on how to resolve the complex problems facing the Middle East, bin Alawi said this was only "natural" for any party involved in crisis. On Lebanon, bin Alawi remarked that the Syrians genuinely appeared to want the different Lebanese factions to reach a mutually agreeable compromise that would allow for participation of opposition groups in the government, as well as lay the groundwork for elections for a new parliament and president. Bin Alawi also claimed that the Syrians were not against the formation of a tribunal to prosecute those allegedly responsible for the death of former Lebanese PM Hariri. What

Syria did oppose, he continued, was the tribunal's proposed mandate and "process," which Damascus feared would be open-ended and misused for political purposes. Bin Alawi wondered out loud if it would be possible for "lawyers from both sides" to meet and define the scope of the tribunal so as to be acceptable to both Syria and the international community. He hoped that the upcoming Arab League summit in Riyadh would prove to be a "turning point" in resolving this and other "inter-Arab problems."

SYRIANS FEEL "MISUNDERSTOOD" BY U.S.

¶4. (C) Asked about Syria's view on other regional issues, bin Alawi replied that his hosts had not directly raised efforts to form a new Palestinian government or relations between Washington and Damascus. The Syrians did, however, complain about U.S. accusations that they backed sectarian strife in Iraq and elsewhere - which they adamantly denied - and groused that the U.S. did not even try to understand how they needed to protect their own national interests. The January visit of Iraqi President Talabani to Damascus, they asserted, demonstrated Syria's good faith desire to play a constructive role in Iraq. The Syrians also denied claims that they were aiding Saddam Hussein loyalists and contended it was only natural for Syria, as a secular nation, to maintain contacts with Iraqi Baathists.

¶5. (C) The Ambassador reminded bin Alawi that Syria bore some responsibility for the problems in Iraq in that it allowed foreign fighters and funds bound for Iraq to pass through its borders. He additionally pointed out that Syrian support for Hamas and other terrorist groups was not a legitimate way for Damascus to defend its interests. Bin

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Alawi agreed that Syria could better control its border with Iraq, but noted that the long Syrian-Iraq frontier was hard to police and that Syrian border guards were easily bribed. He also acknowledged that Syria could likely do more to help Iraq, but said that Damascus felt "boxed in" by the U.S. and was likely waiting for more engagement from outside to step up its efforts. Bin Alawi said he believed that Syria had no interest in a conflict with the U.S. or the international community, and that he hoped that relations between Washington and Damascus would improve as this would reduce Syrian support for Hamas and Hezbollah and increase chances for Syrian-Israeli peace talks.

THE ROLE OF IRAN

¶6. (C) Bin Alawi commented that Iran had strong "pull" in Syria due to the two countries' shared interests, but asserted that Tehran and Damascus had sharply differing interests as well. He claimed, for example, that Tehran would not be able to block Israeli-Syrian peace negotiations if Israel were to offer talks "without conditions." Bin Alawi continued that while Hezbollah received support from both Syria and Iran, it was being "used" by Damascus and Tehran for different reasons.

¶7. (C) Focusing further on Iran, bin Alawi stated that Oman continued to seek to persuade Tehran to "reform" its nuclear and other policies, but was careful to do so in a non-threatening manner. He shared that he planned to travel to Iran "next week" and would use Oman's "open door" in Tehran to urge the Iranians to continue dialogue with the West on the P5 plus 1 proposal. Bin Alawi added that he learned in Damascus that Syrian President Assad also planned to visit Tehran shortly to consult with Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, on "defusing the regional situation" and to recommend that Iran seriously consider halting its nuclear enrichment activities.

¶8. (C) Comment: Predictably, bin Alawi sought to downplay

the significant problems relating to Syria's behavior in the region, vis a vis Lebanon, terrorism, Iraq and Iran. Oman's predilection is to search for a few droplets of liquid in an otherwise empty glass. Oman isn't looking for a role to play with Syria, and bin Alawi's visit was most likely in response to a request from other Arab or GCC governments to try to warm Oman's cool relations with Damascus, which has been without an ambassador in Muscat for well over a year. We understand that Damascus may now be seeking Omani agreement for its next ambassador. End Comment.

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